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THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN RECORD

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TWELVE KEYS TO MANAGING FILES IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

by Blaine Hardesty, CRM

(Note: Since the time when this article was first written several years ago, a number of changes have affected recordkeeping in the Federal government and NARA is currently studying new ways of managing information including electronic records. However, many of the principles described below remain relevant to this day.)

THE PROBLEM. Both private and public organizations face the same general types of difficulties in handling their records. Some succeed and some fail. Despite the constant introduction of new technology in equipment, media, and automated retrieval; success in filing systems depends more on proper application of fundamentals than on hardware or software selection. Whatever the media, what are the basic features that separate a good files system from a poor one? What fundamentals do we need to know to develop a good system?

THE NEED. We need an abstract of the major files concepts on which to build a first class operation. The ideas we want to see are not new, but for too long they have been buried in the technical details or hidden in flowery statements of philosophy. Files personnel need to have these principle ideas retrieved, identified, ranked in proper order, and briefly explained.

THE SOLUTION. Files operations in any organization would be a relatively simple matter if everyone concerned with management of those files were fully aware of only twelve fundamen-

tal concepts. These ideas are listed and briefly explained below--in the approximate order of their importance. Without a clear understanding of these ideas, the design and maintenance of successful filing systems is difficult or even impossible. Instead, misdirected efforts at improvement works on the perceived symptoms and does little to correct the underlying problems. In such cases, funds invested hopefully in people, new equipment, or supplies are largely wasted.

1. **The distinction between "records" and "nonrecord material."** Some of an organization's papers and other information media are (or should be) subject to legal, or administratively determined, retention requirements--we call these items "records." Other items have no such requirement--we call this material, "nonrecord." Different organizations may use different terminology for this distinction, but the concept is the same. Employees need to know which is which, because the difference forms the basis of any formal records program. This concept relates to the need to provide adequate documentary evidence of the organization's policies and activities while preventing unneeded paperwork. People handling files need to understand the definition and easily recognize the difference for all types of material in their offices. Why? Consider the rules:

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Our Phone Numbers Have Changed!

Records Center Services	Telephone Number	Name/Email
Transfer of records to the Federal Records Center. SF-135s, and Records Disposition Notices.	303-407-5760	denver.transfer@nara.gov
Reference services. OF-11s, CIPS, etc.	303-407-5760	denver.reference@nara.gov
Bankruptcy Records	303-407-5700	denver.reference@nara.gov

Archival Operations	Telephone Number	Name/Email
Archival Records Research	303-407-5740	denver.archives@nara.gov
Genealogy	303-407-5740	Eileen Bolger eileen.bolger@nara.gov
Public Programs	303-407-5749	Eileen Bolger

Records Management	Telephone Number	Name/Email
Records appraisal	303-407-5720	Nancy Merz, CRM, CA
Disaster preparedness and response	303-407-5720	Kathy Arntz, CRP
RM training & workshops	303-407-5720	workshop.denver@nara.gov
Targeted assistance (New Mexico)	303-407-5720 505-248-7555	Pat Day Kathy Arntz, CRP Steve Adams, CRM

Records. The "records" need to be handled strictly by the rules of the formal retention schedule. This legal document provides the only acceptable guidance. Any other treatment of "records" is illegal in the U. S. Federal Government and may also present serious legal risks and potential problems in other organizations.

Nonrecord. The "nonrecord material" may be handled any way the user finds convenient--with decisions based on its value and importance. This handling may range from tossing it into a wastebasket, to stuffing it into a desk drawer, to (if it's worthy or has special interest value) depositing it into an organized, formal library or museum.

Note: Nonrecord material is not necessarily exempt from subpoena or document discovery. The record versus nonrecord distinction concerns the legal/administrative retention requirements of a document, not its admissibility as evidence.

2. **The approved retention schedule covering all records series.** Files should be organized according to the current retention rules. This is true because records may be kept and disposed of only in accordance with a formal "retention schedule," approved by the individual organization's management.

Approval. Approving a schedule requires concurrence from operating managers, administrative and financial managers, legal counsel, and (sometimes) interested government officials. Schedules of U. S. Federal agencies also require formal approval from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

Series identification. The published schedule lists all records "series" (an identified

grouping of related records that may be treated as a unit for disposition purposes). The organization must then set up the files to recognize that schedule and design the file system around the listed records series.

Compatibility. The filing scheme and the retention schedule must be fully compatible. Terms and procedures must be consistent. File systems should be designed to make schedule compliance simple and sure. For example, it is ridiculous to have a "subject" oriented file system and have the schedule organized by form numbers. An automated retrieval system may cause serious problems if it does not include retention criteria. For best results, the file system and the schedule should be published as a single, unified document.

Screening (purging). Decisions on retention periods need to be made before putting the documents into the file folder (and sometimes before they are even created). Decisions cannot be put off to some vaguely defined time in the distant future, "We'll keep it for now and decide later." Then, someday the folders will have to be reviewed. "Screening" old files for disposal is difficult, boring, wasteful, and expensive work; it should not be necessary if a proper schedule is followed when the records are created and filed.

3. **The "life cycle" concept of records.** Files systems cannot be operated in a vacuum, separate and apart from other records and information systems. An appreciation of the way files are used in relationship with other records management elements is essential. For example, correspondence creation practices will determine which copies may be available

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Records Management Courses Rocky Mountain Region FY 2004

Basic Records Operations—\$150

An exercise-based class on managing records, covering what to file, how to file it, and how to remove files no longer needed for current business. By examining "best practices" and through hands-on exercises, participants develop the knowledge and skills to fulfill their records responsibilities and improve office efficiency.

Albuquerque, NM	February 10, 2004	Denver, CO	March 2, 2004
Salt Lake City, UT	April 20, 2004	Denver, CO	June 8, 2004
Billings, MT		July 21, 2004	

Advanced Records Operations—\$150

A workshop on how to establish official file stations and control the flow of records from the time records are created until they are no longer needed for current operations. The processes covered include surveying and inventorying program files (including traditional and electronic media), developing and implementing a file plan to make records more accessible to the program staff, and proper disposition of records when no longer needed for current business.

Albuquerque, NM	February 11, 2004	Denver, CO	March 3, 2004 & June 9, 2004
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Electronic Records Forum

Albuquerque, NM	June 2004 (to be announced)
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Electronic Records Issues—\$150

The class covers the activities involved in the full life cycle of electronic record keeping systems, and major issues and problems faced in managing electronic records in a Federal agency.

Albuquerque, NM	February 24, 2004	Denver, CO	March 4, 2004
Salt Lake City, UT	April 21, 2004	Denver, CO	June 10, 2004
Billings, MT		July 22, 2004	

Disaster Preparedness and Response for Records Managers—\$300

A workshop focusing on the role of the records manager in the event of a records-related disaster. The workshop covers disaster planning and disaster mitigation, disaster response, and disaster recovery.

Denver, CO	June 16-17, 2004	Albuquerque, NM	February 25, 2004 (Vital Records only)
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Records Transfer and Reference (FREE) How to transfer and retrieve records from the Federal Records Center.

Salt Lake City, UT	April 19, 2004	Denver, CO	June 7, 2004
Billings, MT		July 20, 2004	

For all classes (except "Records Transfer and Reference") contact the Records Management Division @ 303-407-5720, workshop.denver@nara.gov

For "Records Transfer and Reference" only, contact (Adrienne Myser) at (303) 407-5767, adrienne.myser@nara.gov.

For all nationwide NARA workshops, see: http://www.archives.gov/records_management/training/nationwide_training.html#basic

NARA does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, color, national origin, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation, and status as a parent in its records management training.

for filing and the filing methods may determine what is available for the archives. **The cycle.** Records are created, used for their primary purpose, then stored and maintained. When inactive, they may be retired to a records center. During both active and inactive storage, they may be retrieved for primary or secondary purposes, and then eventually disposed of (by destruction or transfer to archival retention--kept forever). The file system must integrate smoothly into that cycle to be successful. By fitting into the cycle, the system has the best chance to respond to the total information needs of the organization.

Too many people working with records give "lip service" to the life cycle idea but ignore it when designing file systems. Instead, they concentrate primarily on the retrieval aspects and lessen the total value of their system.

4. **The File Station and the File Plan.** All records in a given unit need to be under the charge of a responsible person within that unit. The formal assignment of responsibility for specific records to a single person creates a designated "files station." Collectively, these individuals are responsible to management for files operations of the entire organization. This responsibility should be clearly shown with a chain of designations extending from the head of the organization all the way to the individual files custodian. Large volumes of files can be managed well only when individual file stations are formally assigned and when an approved "file plan" (a document properly listing all files at that station) exists for each such assignment.

Central files. Arguments over the merits of centralized (main file room) versus decentralized file systems simply disappear with a proper network of file stations.

This structure results in centralized control

(the major benefit) with either centralized or physically decentralized files.

5. **Distinction between case files and subject files.** These two elemental methods of filing require totally different logic in system design and files maintenance procedures. Case files (e.g., transaction, project, or personnel files) usually have a natural arrangement pattern (alphabetical names, sequential numbers, ID numbers, etc.). However, an arbitrary or artificial classification scheme must be created to organize subject (general correspondence) files. Mixing the two types of files produces file system confusion, but they can be segregated if they are recognizable as separate entities. People have to know the difference!

Case files. Most (about 85%) of our records are case records (which may be referred to in England as "particular instance papers"). Case files are files containing material relating to a specific action, event, person, organization, location, product, or thing identified by that file. Good examples are personnel folders, project files, and transaction files. They are arranged by name or number. The term "case" bothers some people, but it is a useful generic term to group the many types of files meeting this definition.

Subject files. Subject files are files containing material covering the general policy or operations of a unit, not a specific event, person, or transaction. They are arranged by "subjects"--classifications, which are

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based on the content of the document or the ideas conveyed in that document.

6. **Distinction between administrative files and program files.** These records are also called by other names (facilitative or housekeeping as opposed to substantive or operating). The former concern the internal administration of the organization and, as such, are subject to more efficient guidance and standardization. The latter are unique to the objectives and functions of the particular operating unit creating them and thus require unique handling.

Standardization. Files systems can still be "standardized" while recognizing and accommodating the unique aspects of widely varying types of records from different units.

7. **Hierarchical classification arrangement for subject files.** Simply keeping file captions in alpha order may suffice for small collections of one drawer or less. However, larger systems need the tree-like structure of the hierarchical arrangement--with primary headings and layers of included (secondary, tertiary, etc.) topics. This type of scheme groups like subjects and provides much better control than the straight alphabetical (dictionary) arrangement.
8. **Functional grouping for subject files.** Files should be part of the operation of any organization, not merely a burden on that operation. Since most organizations are structured along functional lines (the work to be done), the files should be organized to follow those same lines. Series of case files are easily grouped by the

unit creating them. So, this grouping usually provides the needed functional separation without extra effort.

But, subject files are different, they require an artificially created classification scheme. In a hierarchical arrangement, the primary headings should coincide with the major functions--the mission, the job, work being done. As such, the headings should usually be based on verbs (or verbals) describing that work, not nouns. For example, in a personnel office, "Training" would be a much more descriptive and helpful primary heading than "Schools, seminars, and workshops." This practice is exactly the opposite of that used for reference material, which is best classified by "areas of interest" or "things," words that are usually nouns.

9. **Controlled remote storage for inactive files.** Off-site storage is beneficial only when it is formally organized and controlled--only then can it legitimately be called a "records center." Uncontrolled remote storage leads to disaster with an "out-of-sight/out-of-mind" attitude. The policies and procedures of the file system must incorporate and support the records center procedures; whether in-house, commercial, or other external (e.g., Federal Records Centers).
10. **Files cutoff.** The retention period of any record has a beginning point, a point at which "the clock starts." This point is sometimes called a retention "trigger" and is based on the time it is closed--not necessarily related to the time the file was started (opened). The file system must recognize this concept to make the retention schedule work.

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Procedures must clearly state how and when the files in each series are to be closed and cut off. Case files are normally closed on the basis of an event (final payment on the contract, departure of the employee, completion of the project, etc.). Subject files must be arbitrarily cut off on the basis of a timetable created by the organization (such as, the end of each fiscal year).

Proper use of closing procedures and files cutoff eliminates (or greatly reduces) the need for screening old material from the files.

11. **Distinction among records centers, archives, and libraries.** Many people confuse the functions of these three separate types of facilities. Records may move from the creator to the file room, through the records center, and eventually end up in the archives, but they are still records (official documentation). File room or office storage implies active condition, while records center storage implies inactive status with predetermined disposition. Conversely, archives storage means that someone in authority has decided the documents should be kept forever--but the documents are still records.

Libraries, on the other hand, usually have holdings with strictly reference value (nonrecord materials). These may be very valuable and important reference items, but they are still nonrecord. They are not legal documentation of the organization's policies and activities.

12. **The importance of daily filing.** No matter how well designed or what technology is involved, no files system will

work effectively unless people keep it up to date with proper daily filing practices. Filing duties are part of an office's function (and the administrative or clerical person's job) not an interruption of it. Good intentions will not get the job done; success requires people with the knowledge, the desire, and the time available to do the work--every day.

THE CHALLENGE. There you have the program--only a dozen, fairly simple, ideas. All we need to do is convey these ideas to all personnel involved in files operations and we solve (or avoid) the problems. The question then, is how best to convey this information so that the people receive a clear message. Formal guidelines, management orientation, employee training, technical support, and continuing evaluation are essential.

ADDITIONAL STUDY. The above information should serve only as a broad guideline or checklist, not a complete text in files operations. For example, the details of NARA's guidance on "Subject Filing" alone fill a 64-page handbook. Additional explanation and information probably will be needed (and is available) for each of the individual ideas presented above.

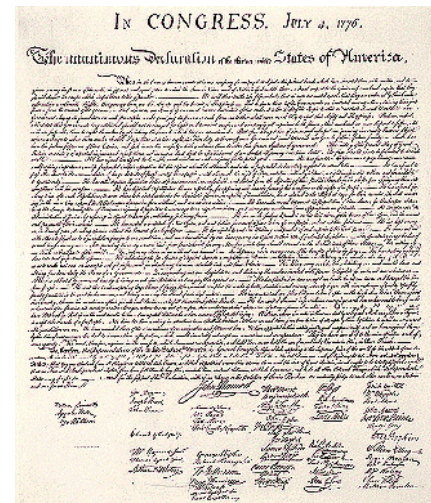
THE OTHER STUFF. You will note in the above that there is no mention of mnemonic coding schemes, various numeric methods, or even the relative merits of numerical versus alpha filing. Neither is there a mention of sophisticated equipment or fancy supplies (e.g., optical scanning, electronic indexing, bar codes, powered retrieval units, or even color-coded file folders or labels). These facets of files management are interesting and sometimes fun, but they should be considered only after mastering the twelve basic concepts.

(Blaine Hardesty, CRM, is retired from the National Archives and Records Administration, which he served with great dedication as a Management Analyst and Assistant Records Center Director during a long and accomplished career.)

The Results of The People's Vote: The most influential documents in American history.

The People's Vote, co-sponsored by the National Archives and Records Administration, National History Day, and *U.S. News & World Report*, invited Americans of all ages and educational backgrounds to vote for 10 of 100 milestone documents drawn mainly from the holdings of the National Archives.

1. The Declaration of Independence
2. The U.S. Constitution
3. The Bill of Rights
4. The Louisiana Purchase Treaty
5. The Emancipation Proclamation
6. The 19th Amendment to the Constitution
7. The 13th Amendment to the Constitution
8. The Gettysburg Address
9. The Civil Rights Act
10. The Social Security Act



Goodbye, Laurie!

Laurie Sletten, our friend and colleague, is leaving NARA to become the Director of the Records Management Division of the Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records. Laurie has served as a senior records analyst with NARA since April 2000. Her friends at NARA and the Federal agency customers that she served will miss her greatly.

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